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Pussy Patrols in Academia: Towards a Disobedient, Sex-Worker Inclusive Feminist Praxis

Jenny Heineman

The “pussy patrols” in academia are the economic, discursive, sexual, and epistemological forms of violence in academia that control, silence, and reroute all femmes—not just cis women—in higher education. Although feminists have long examined sexual harassment in educational and occupational spaces, very few have turned their attention to the specific, embodied experiences of sex-working academics. Employing “epistemic disobedience” and “Critical Life Story” interviewing methodologies, I look at the experiences of thirteen sex-working academics, including my own experiences as a sex-working undergraduate and graduate student. I disrupt the false dichotomy of empowerment/oppression in the sex industry; I ask if higher education is necessarily emancipatory; and I offer suggestions, based on the forced rerouting and silencing of sex-working academics, for moving forward as activist-academics. Indeed, the time for rebelling against the strict academic codes that rely on Cartesian dualism is now.

Keywords: auto-theory / critical university studies / epistemic disobedience / feminist theory / gender / queer theory / sex work / sexuality

Introduction

Carol Leigh, a.k.a. The Scarlet Harlot coined the term “sex work” at a conference in the late 1970s (Leigh 2004, 69). The term itself marked a cultural shift: discourse on erotic labor changed from narratives that positioned sex workers as having debauched sexual identities to standpoints that designated our work as *work*. Contemporary sex workers’ rights movements employ the adage, “Sex work

is WORK!” for this reason. However, not everyone in the sex industry experiences their labor there as work, not everyone selling twenty-dollar blowjobs feels empowered doing so and not everyone selling \$5,000 “Girlfriend Experiences” feels economically liberated. I should know. I’ve done both.

The discourse of sex-work-as-work perpetuates the false dichotomy between empowerment and oppression. This dichotomy misses the obvious overlap of sex workers’ rights with other movements for, as examples, the rights of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, trans rights, global water rights movements, abolishing ICE, occupying public spaces and eradicating borders, harm reduction and best practices, and economic and social justice for victims of human trafficking, among others.

Many of the aforementioned movements and demands for justice and equity come from a tradition of disruption. Disruption is not just a social and political tool; it is an academic (and moral) imperative. Epistemic disobedience disrupts the subject/object duality in the academy. As Walter D. Mignolo states,

Once upon a time, scholars assumed that the knowing subject in the disciplines is transparent, disincorporated from the known and untouched by the geo-political configuration of the world in which people are racially ranked and regions are racially configured . . . the knowing subject maps the world and its problems, classifies people and projects into what is good for them. (2009, 2)

Even philosopher Michel Foucault, who by some accounts was a centrist (Wehler 1998), nevertheless demanded that intellectuals “criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them” (1974, 2006).

While lower- and lower-middle class Americans have sought out higher education since the revolutions of the 1960s, universities are nonetheless tasked with creating malleable worker-citizens for the state, thus quashing any real resistance or critical thought. Epistemic disobedience allows activist-academics greater insight into the political violence of our collective institutions. Sex-working academics, more specifically, expose the economic, discursive, sexual, and epistemological violence of institutions of higher education.

What follows is a three-pronged disruption: first, I disrupt dichotomies of empowerment and oppression in the sex industry. Second, I disrupt narratives of education as necessarily emancipatory. Third, I offer suggestions for moving forward, for weaving together the plights of other progressive movements with the voice and social capital of academics toward a sex-worker inclusive feminist praxis.

By looking at the experiences of sex-working academics, including both students and faculty, I ask, what is emancipation? And what does it mean to have both bodily and cognitive emancipation from the tentacles of white

supremacy, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and imperialism? What can sex-working academics tell us about institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, institutions like academia? And what can the institutional betrayals that many sex-working academics experience tell us about the shortcomings of feminism?

Patriarchal Bargains: The Price of Sex, The Price of Knowledge

“Patriarchal Bargains” (Kandiyoti 1988) are the cost/benefit analyses that many young women make under systems of heteropatriarchy. Using sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia as illustrative, ideal types of male-dominated cultures, Deniz Kandiyoti argues that patriarchy is neither monolithic nor static. Thus, women’s responses to domination are often historically and culturally situated; older women in patrilineal kin-based patriarchal social structures, for example, may oppress younger, subordinate women in order to achieve proximity to patriarchal power. The culture-specific patriarchal bargains that women make may appear to many outsiders, including Western, feminist scholars, as internalized misogyny or false consciousness. For women who are coerced into making these cost/benefit analyses, however, patriarchal bargains are more complex.

In 2008, Francis Fox Piven asked me, “Would the sex industry exist under a matriarchy?” To which I replied, “I don’t know. I just don’t know, Dr. Piven.”¹ What I did know, however, was that after meeting the famed academic at a conference, I was going to duck into a Las Vegas hotel room in order to perform oral sex on a stranger.

My client was a politician, in town on business, and planted in one of those suits where you get your own kitchen. There was a fuzzy layer of goo staring lethargically from the stove while the indifferent musings of a television delivered its messages to no one at all. I replaced my real student garb—a black blazer and black slacks—with the performative elements of a school-girl—knee-high socks, plaid skirt, tits pooling out of a tiny crop top; a gross polymorphous performativity. I also knew, as I shook Francis Fox Piven’s hand, that my compensation for blowing a stranger animated the core of academia’s wild profit margin—I would use the reparation to pay off my library fees from overdue books. *Blowjobs for books*, I hummed as the innocuous client gyrated his hips and smacked his lips.

It is increasingly common for young femmes to make patriarchal bargains in order to attend school or offset the costs associated with higher education. Online “sugar dating” platforms, which facilitate relationships between young people and older, wealthier men, boast that many of their “sugar babies” are college students looking for assistance with tuition.

In 2013, I lived in the Mojave Desert as my belly ballooned with the life growing inside. While mostly retired from sex work, I was a PhD candidate with

massive student loan debt and mounting medical expenses, including a \$10,000 dollar ER visit after tumbling down the stairs while six months pregnant. I attempted to engage in online fetish work to offset the costs of my education and pregnancy, but after acquiring a stalker who threatened the safety of my unborn child, I took an almost permanent break from sex work. While trying to keep my child and myself happy and healthy, I was also writing a dissertation and conducting regular interviews with sex-working students and faculty. Using Critical Life Story (CLS) interviewing, which is a completely open-ended interviewing technique created by feminist scholar Elizabeth Payne (2010), I asked all of my interviewees that same “lead-off” question: What can you tell me about the experience of being a current or former sex worker in academia? As detailed by Payne, the goal of CLS interviewing is to let the conversation develop as organically as possible. While I paid close attention to any mention of stigma, microaggression, or violence in both the sex industry and institutions of higher education, I came to each interview with intentions to listen; I did not steer the conversation in any particular direction.

One of the first interviews I conducted as a pregnant, mostly former sex worker, and PhD candidate was with Jenna. Jenna came from a white, working-class background and was, at the time of interview, a graduate student. Of the intersection of sex work and higher education, she recalled:

In my personal situation, I would not have had many other options to get to the place [in academia] where I'm at [without sex work], and sex work has just really contributed in a positive way to my life because I would not be in the same place in school [without it]. Like, I was suffering really, really bad, I needed a lot of help, and free time and school were a big part of my healing—just to be able to focus on myself like that.²

Jenna did not claim that sex work or sugar dating were essential to her healing—she cited, rather, “free time and school.” Discourse on sex work does not often allow for this nuance or complexity; as feminists, we are pithed by debate about the merits, morality, and ethics of the sex industry itself, rather than what the industry can sometimes afford marginalized people. In a sociopolitical environment marred by what Tarak Barkawi (2013) calls a “New Order of Higher Education,” which is a neoliberal assault on academia that prices people out of it, the question is no longer “is sex work ethical?” but instead, “what are the catalysts for sex work and are *they* ethical?” Education was clearly important to Jenna, and she made a patriarchal bargain in order to access it. For Jenna, the catalyst for her sex work was the price of education. The global, unethical practices of late capitalism not only create working-class people like Jenna; they create entirely stateless people, too. For many undocumented people across the globe, the underground economy is one way to earn a living wage.

In 2014, I interviewed European sex worker and undergraduate student Lorelei while I held my newborn baby to my breast. Lorelei smoked a joint

through the duration of our Skype interview and repeatedly said “Bless!” whenever my little one cooed. Reflecting on the interview four years later, Lorelei’s warmth, even in the face of great adversity, fills me with gratitude. At the time of interview, Lorelei was an undocumented and working-class woman of color. Whereas sex work lent itself to schooling for Jenna, schooling lent itself to sex work for Lorelei. As she recalled in our interview,

I’ve wanted to be a sex worker for a very long time. I’ve been talking and joking about it to my sister since I was like fourteen years old. I remember being in school, and I would say to my sister, when we go to [university], we should be escorts. . . . It’s something that I’ve wanted to do for a long time. . . . I wanted to be able to buy the things I wanted and get away from my very strict religious household. . . . [In that sense] sex work has been sexually liberating.³

Although Lorelei spoke of sex work as “liberating,” she also noted the racist and classist practices within the sex industry. “Because I am undocumented and Black,” she said, “I have to do more [sexual services] for less [money].”⁴ Radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin (1981) problematize narratives of sexual liberation like Lorelei’s by asking, essentially, “sexual liberation for *whom*?” Dworkin argues,

It is always extraordinary, when looking at this money exchange, to understand that in most people’s minds the money is worth more than the woman is. The ten dollars, the thirty dollars, the fifty dollars, is worth much more than her whole life. The money is real, more real than she is. With the money he can buy a human life and erase its importance from every aspect of civil and social consciousness and conscience and society, from the protections of law, from any right of citizenship, from any concept of human dignity and human sovereignty. (1993, 4)

While Lorelei reported feelings of sexual liberation in sex work, it is important to interrogate her declaration. If nothing else, “second wave” feminists like Dworkin remind us that true liberation is not possible if we are beholden to the prices and services set by our colonialist masters. Within a heteropatriarchy, where money is worth more than a woman’s whole life, there is a tendency to mistake patriarchal bargains for liberation. Teasing apart *bargain* from *emancipation* is one small step toward a sex-worker inclusive feminist praxis.

Feminist scholar Laura Agustín (2007) examines the intersection of sex work and undocumented migration, arguing for a more nuanced look at what compels already marginalized people into the sex industry. She finds that undocumented people like Lorelei choose sex work because it is one of the only means by which stigmatized, criminalized, and undocumented people can access an education. Taking abstract notions of liberation and emancipation out of the equation allows feminist scholars to read Lorelei as making completely rational choices within utterly irrational and unjust systems—again, as making

a patriarchal bargain. As far as I can tell, you can fuck your way into an education, but truly emancipatory knowledge is priceless.

Academics and civilians alike are shocked at—and perhaps insulted by—the suggestion that sex workers exist in higher education at all. Even as unemployment among PhDs rises and the number of adjuncts on welfare and food stamps reaches epidemic-like levels (*Kendzior 2012; DeSimone 2012*), there is scarcely any research on how marginalized and undocumented women like Lorilie earn a living while attending university, particularly when their immigration status necessitates working in the informal economy.

In 2015, while chain-smoking and crowd-sourcing funds for a divorce—a horrible split where my sex work was used as character evidence in my fight for custody of my child—I interviewed a white, working-class sex-working graduate student named Noel. Like Jenna, Noel imagined academia to be a place of emancipation. As she stated in our interview,

I guess the story really starts in high school. I decided that in order to get anywhere in life, I had to get an education. I saw where my family came from and knew that we were really lower class and education was the only way out. I went to school full-time most of the time, when I could, and that's partially what led me to working in the [strip] clubs eventually. It was a financial decision. . . . It was a pragmatic decision . . . just kind of a supplement.⁵

For Noel, sex work provided the necessary resources for pursuing an advanced degree. It seems a great omission, then, that much academic feminism focuses on the oppressiveness of the sex industry without once mentioning the price of higher education (*Dworkin 1993; MacKinnon 1989; Raymond 2013; Bindel 2006; Jeffreys 2012; Farley 2009*). This omission is a particular kind of institutional betrayal, as it allows academia to remain neutral and independent, obscurely exercising political violence in the minds of non-sex-working academics (*Chomsky and Foucault [1974] 2006*).

Supplementing academic stipends with sex work is not limited to women from working-class backgrounds. Like Miriam Weeks (a.k.a., “The Duke Porn Star”), who became a household name after being outed (without her consent) for performing in pornographic films to pay for her Ivy League tuition, interviewee Lucy also attended a prestigious university at the time of our conversation.

Folded into the cool basement of the house I shared with my partner, long before I would have to reconcile my sex work and my maternal abilities in front of a patriarchal court, I interviewed Lucy over the phone, using the same lead-off question as previous interviews. A white, sex-working graduate student, she said, I have commiserated [with other sex-working students] on, like, how did we get from there to here, how did we get to this point in our lives when we are at this really prestigious top-ten research university and have to resort to this [sex work]?⁶

Lucy did not speak well of sex work, likely because of the dominant cultural narrative in which sex workers are portrayed as destitute. “Resorting” to sex work is arguably unsavory for upper-class women because of its association with poverty. However, the more privatized and exclusive that access to knowledge and education becomes, the more that feminized, erotic labor will become a viable means by which femmes access basic necessities like a degree, including femmes who are not at all “destitute.”

While Lucy spoke much more fondly of education than sex work, not everyone I interviewed between 2012 and 2018 found higher education to be liberating. Just as discourse on sex work must be nuanced, so too must the discussion on the liberatory potential of academia.

In 2014, with my newborn baby in a sling at my chest, I interviewed Jamie, a white, sex-working PhD student in the Southwest. Jamie grew up poor in Appalachia, and entered the sex industry after becoming homeless with her two children. Sex work afforded her access to food, stable housing, and an education. A bright, quick-witted intellectual, Jamie sailed through her undergraduate and master’s degrees. It was not until she pursued her PhD, though, that higher education showed its true colors—“just a business like any other,” she lamented. Indeed, as the nebulousness of social class grows and the cultural capital of an advanced degree dwindles, the relationship between higher education and sex work strengthens. As Jamie explained in our interview,

It is a definite possibility that I will engage in sex work even after getting my PhD. . . . Living wages in academia only exist for the very few highly competitive tenure-track positions and working as a part-time instructor or adjunct will not cover my monthly expenses [or] pay down my student loans.⁷

By looking at the experiences of sex workers in academia, whether students or faculty, activist academics can better understand the institutional betrayals against marginalized women more generally. An inclusive and intersectional feminist praxis in academic work, then, must nuance both sex work and higher education.

On April 11, 2018, President Trump signed into law the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (H.R. 1865). The law holds online platforms responsible for users’ content. The bill was seemingly innocuous for civilians, but for sex workers, sex-trafficking survivors, and allies, the bill eradicated the online safety nets that marginalized and criminalized people made. Platforms where sex workers screened clients and shared “bad date” lists, for example, shuttered their doors. In the weeks following the bill, US-based nonprofits saw as much as a fourfold increase in street-based sex work (Burns 2018). Additionally, sex workers reported engaging in more risky behavior, including seeking the assistance of pimps, because they lacked the safety nets and independence that Internet platforms provided (Burns 2018).

As an activist academic, the ACLU of Southern California, along with several sex workers' rights organizations, invited me to attend an emergency meeting after FOSTA became law. Collaboratively, more than thirty academics, sex workers, sex-trafficking survivors, attorneys, and others worked toward litigation against the bill, which resulted in *Woodhull Freedom Foundation et al. v. United States*.

At the meeting, I shared a hotel room with a 60-year-old woman named Kristin who had been sex trafficked as a child. Ours were intense, late-night conversations in our pajamas about the sometimes-blurry line between exploitative and emancipatory experiences.

"I still remember his name," Kristin said with a smile, passing me a joint. "Forty-five years later and I still remember his name. Even now, when people call him my 'trafficker,' I get defensive. There is still a part of me that believes he saved me."⁸

As a youth, Kristin was sex-trafficked by a cop. Working the streets, this particular police officer made a bargain of his own—he would not arrest young Kristin in exchange for sexual services.

In this equation, agency means very little. Even though Kristin "chose" to blow a cop as a kind of patriarchal bargain in which a blowjob seemed less invasive than a night in jail, where she probably would have experienced sexual assault *anyway*, her agency is, nevertheless, something different entirely than emancipation. When the sex workers' rights movement says, "Sex work is WORK!" what does that mean for people like Kristin? And how might nuancing the sex-work-as-work trope aid in a truly radical, truly disobedient feminist praxis?

Although Kristin is herself an academic who travels the world speaking about sex workers' rights to university students, her social capital has not shielded her from the aftermath of FOSTA.

"I'm back at it," she said in our humble hotel room. "I'm 60-years old and because of FOSTA, I can't run the SWOP House [a US-based homeless shelter for sex-trafficked girls]. So I'm back at it. I'm back escorting."⁹

In academia, the patriarchal bargain that Kristin makes is with the minimal compensation she receives for speaking events—"Between zero dollars and \$500," she said. In the sex industry, the patriarchal bargain she makes is erotic labor in exchange for staying alive.

Radical feminists have long analyzed institutional structures like higher education and the sex industry. Gail Dines and Robert Jensen (1998) each explore the intersecting institutional consequences of patriarchy, capitalism, and racism in the sex industry, but their observations clearly apply to academia, too. In fact, education has long been a concern of radical feminists. Nevertheless, our paralleling movements—sex workers' rights and a right to an education—have yet to join forces. Feminists in academia like Julie Bindel (2006), who have larger platforms than people like Kristin, who are compensated greatly for their

time and profit off of the narratives of sex workers and survivors to boot, are preoccupied with the merits, morality, and ethics of the sex industry. Instead, the radical, disobedient feminist question should be, “how do we make the sex industry safer?” and relatedly, “how do we make education more accessible and equitable?”

At the end of the day, a truly radical, disobedient feminist praxis must fight as vehemently for public women as it fights for public education.

Canaries in the Coal Mine: Cautionary Tales from Sex-Working Academics

Of all the sex-working academics I interviewed, all experienced some degree of unwanted sexual overtures and/or outing (of their current or former sex work) in academia, which they all attributed to perceptions of their hypersexuality.¹⁰ Of course, it is not just sex-working academics who experience sexual harassment in academia. Other academics on the margins have long attributed racist and colonialist ideas about the body to perceptions of their hypersexuality in spaces of higher education

Since the 1980s, sexual harassment in academia has been the focus of many feminists (Gutek 1981; Franklin et al. 1981; Crocker and Simon 1981; Dziech 1984). Frances Hoffmann (1986) argued that structural conditions like patriarchy underlie the problem of sexual harassment against women in academia, whether perpetrated against students or faculty. Scholar Louise F. Fitzgerald et al. (1988, 154) specifically argued that “[T]he central concepts of sexual harassment is the misuse of power, whether organizationally or institutionally, in a manner that constructs a barrier to women’s educational and occupational pursuits.”

More recently, Patricia Hill Collins analyzes the racialization of “freak” sexualities that are “situated at the crossroads of colonialism, science, and entertainment” (2005, 120). Looking at the mistreatment of historical figures like Sarah Bartmann to contemporary Black woman’s experiences, Collins shows how cultural markings of hypersexuality are rooted in racism generally and white supremacist notions of sexual availability more specifically. These findings are congruent with other sex-working academics’ experiences. Other studies confirm that sex-working students, for example, experience high rates of unwanted sexual attention (The Student Sex Worker Project 2015).

Barring the work of intersectional, pro-ho feminist philosophies that are taking root in activist spaces outside of academia, Anglophone, anti-sex-work feminists in academia scapegoat the archetype of the whore, blaming sex workers for the cultural objectification and hypersexualization of civilian women. To quote Andrea Dworkin again:

The sexuality of the woman actualized is the sexuality of the whore; desire on her part is the slut’s lust; once sexually available, it does not matter how

she is used, why, by whom, by how many, or how often. Her sexual will can exist only as a will to be used. Whatever happens to her, it is all the same. If she loathes it, it is not wrong [. . .] Central to the politics of liberation is the mass-marketing of material that depicts women being used as whores. . . . [F]reedom is the mass-marketing of women as whore. (1993, 1)

“Women being used as whores” is to say whores are not *ourselves* women; we are ostensibly the reason for our own nonconsensual objectification and hypersexualization, just as we are responsible for the degradation of other women. This kind of Anglophone, anti-sex-work feminism in academia, a tradition continued by more contemporary scholars like Janice Raymond and others, is why so many of us whores and sluts must reroute our academic experiences by remaining closeted about our sex work or by simply enduring the macro- and microaggressions of our professors, peers, and colleagues. Nothing exposes Cartesian dualisms like a whore in academia. Relatedly, Mignolo (2009, 2) states:

Geo-politics of knowledge goes hand in hand with geo-politics of knowing. Who and when, why and where is knowledge generated (rather than produced, like cars or cell phones)? Asking these questions means to shift the attention from the enunciated to the enunciation. And by so doing, turning Descartes’s dictum inside out: rather than assuming that thinking comes before being, one assumes instead that it is a racially marked body in a geo-historical marked space that feels the urge or gets the call to speak, to articulate, in whatever semiotic system, the urge that makes of living organisms “human” beings.

Of course, Mignolo’s statement is about the racialized object/subject dualism that is so often perpetuated through academic research and intellectual discourse. But having a body culturally defined as “public” is likewise a particular way of knowing, a particular bodily experience inside spaces that are outright antagonistic toward the body, that also turn Descartes’s dictum inside out.

A sex worker inclusive feminist praxis, then, acknowledges the continuum of bodies deemed public, bodies deemed perpetually available, and bodies deemed disposable.

Stigma and perceptions of hypersexuality are discourses that serve to measure the value of particular bodies (Foucault [1976] 1990). Often attributed to antiquated mind/body dualisms, these discourses are nevertheless alive and well in academia (Taylor 2006; Miceli 2007; Payne 2010; Tuchman 2009). For many sex-working students and professors, stigma and perceptions of hypersexuality, which are discourses threaded into the fabric of mind/body dualisms, compel sex-working academics to reroute their experiences in academia. When bodies are measured through the lens of dualisms, in a culture that is both obsessed with and disgusted by sex, stigma and perceptions of hypersexuality engender a fear of violence among sex-working academics.

In 2014, I interviewed Lena, a white working-class graduate student who was, at the time of interview, pursuing her second master's degree. She was "outed for some amateur porn and erotic photos," itself an act of violence, at her undergraduate university. She described her experience over the phone:

I was outed by the school newspaper. I was in one of my poses [printed without consent], naked, on the cover of this magazine. . . . I was literally consumed by my academic peers. I think [what I experienced being "outed" without consent] has to do with academics thinking women can't do both at once, like you can't expect to be getting your PhD and also be a sex worker at the same time. It's like you can't have your cake and eat it too or something. It's like [academia] is a more virtuous path than sex work, which is why you have to be a victim to get respect. It probably goes back to the Madonna/Whore dichotomy.¹¹

When social scientific research begins with the assumption that Cartesian dualities are a thing of the past, as some embodiment scholars tend to imply (Merleau-Ponty 1945; ; Bourdieu 1987), they fail to ask the right questions; they are akin to "postracial" and "transracial" theories of the social world that merely describe utopia, not reality (Tuvel 2017). The reality for many sex-working academics is that our experiences are rooted in dichotomies, dichotomies that serve to shame us out of academia. The Madonna/Whore dichotomy that Lena addresses adequately describes lingering Cartesian dualisms in academia; there is an assumption that one cannot be both sexual and smart.

Like Lena, interviewee Bailey was outed without her consent. Her experience also speaks to dualities in academia. I interviewed Bailey in my Las Vegas apartment while hugely pregnant and experiencing a great deal of morning sickness. Several prominent academics had just warned me that my pregnancy put my graduate student stipend in jeopardy. Despite the illegality of the threat, I made the patriarchal bargain to remain silent in hopes that my submission would allow me to continue my research and earn the degree to which I had devoted seven years of my life. Everything, now, was for my unborn child.

White and working class, Baily was, at the time of interview, a sex-working graduate student and instructor who went into academia to "eliminate [the] stigma that sex workers experience." However, she had to reroute her path in academia because of her sex work:

I grew up in the ghetto, you know what I mean? So I wouldn't even be here if I hadn't worked really, really hard. So I'm constantly aware of my status, you know. . . . In fact, I have a bunch of [academic] talks on YouTube . . . and one commenter [on YouTube] went to great lengths to post pictures of me from my pornographic videos. It was an attempt to invalidate my legitimacy [as an academic] . . . So now, when I'm teaching, I have to think about how I'm dressed, not too sexy because I don't want to be seen as *just* a porn star.¹²

Black Feminists were the first to point to the inherent violence of perceptions of hypersexualization (Collins 2000; hooks 1981; Lorde 2004). Perceiving particular bodies to be hypersexual *without the subject's consent* is stigmatizing because it indisputably removes agency from the objectified subject. Ironically, Anglophone anti-sex-work feminists in academia use this very argument to advocate for the eradication of the sex industry (Raymond 2013; Farley 2013). Like Raymond (2004, 1) states, "Governments, UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and others act as if the male demand for sexual exploitation is insignificant, or that prostitution is so entrenched because, after all, 'men will be men.'"

The important distinction here is consent—for example, I have consented to the objectification of my body in particular contexts for agreed-upon compensation in the sex industry. Within the context of consent, I did not experience objectification as violent. Alternatively, in academic spaces where I have *not* consented to the objectification of my body, I experience objectification as stigmatizing and violent. Being hit on by my professors as a student, as an example, or being cornered by drunk, pawing colleagues as they mumble something like, "But you're a *sex worker*!" are the kinds of experiences generated from dualisms that academics interrogate less frequently, namely because they are self-incriminating.

Black Feminist theories on objectification, hypersexualization, stigmatization, and violence are important for understanding the experiences of sex-working academics. As Samantha, a Black sex-working academic with a PhD said in our phone interview, "I think that other professors [who] are uncomfortable with my sex work think it is a level of promiscuity. Like I'm going to get them caught up in a sex scandal."¹³

Social anxieties surrounding sex and sexuality have historically been projected onto the bodies of marginalized people (Walkowitz 1992). In Samantha's case, she is hypersexualized as both a sex worker and as a Black woman. She walks through the world of academe not as an objective, rigorous scholar (as if there is such a thing or as if we should strive for that in the first place), but as a body that is seemingly always at the ready for scandal.

Dualities also persist in Vivian Salt's account of discourses of hypersexuality in academia as a multiracial, sex-working graduate student:

Even with the most enlightened academic . . . there's added layers to the way they [academics] see me . . . and there is a lot of fetishization of sex work there [in academia] and the perception that I am hypersexual. . . . I think that there's definitely an element of sexualization [in academia for sex-working academics] and still being seen primarily as a sexual being, and any [intellectual] contribution is still going to have to go through that lens. . . . When I walk into a space as a student, I'm a student first . . . but the second that [my sex work] gets dropped, especially if they don't know my academic

credentials, I definitely feel very much both hypersexualized and very much intellectually undermined. . . . There's [also] this assumption of being kind of dead inside—being hypersexual but also like nothing would ever offend me, nothing would ever hurt me, because I just don't feel anything anymore. Like if I'm not traumatized by my work, I'm clearly just like dead.¹⁴

That Vivian Salt described perceptions of hypersexuality as akin to being perceived as “kind of dead inside” is illuminating. In the context of non-consensual objectification, hypersexualization becomes a means by which perpetrators—in this case, other academics—ignore Vivian Salt's humanity, complexity, and consent. Viewing sex workers as intrinsically violated is to say that we have no conception of bodily boundaries or that we are incapable of bodily violation, since our fundamental characteristic is, like a blow-up doll's, to be used on command. To perceive us as “dead already” is to believe that any physical violence against our bodies is irrelevant.

Black, sex-working graduate student Salvia likewise explained the physical manifestation of discourses of hypersexualization. During our 2014 phone interview in my mother's house, where I breastfed my newborn and spoke softly, for fear of my mother hearing, Salvia stated,

[B]eing open about doing certain types of sex work kind of opens the doors, whether I want it to or not, to a certain degree of violence. So it's just like, why should I not protect myself? [I]f I'm walking through the [academic] world as a sex worker of color, it opens me up to violence from heterosexual men who see my sexual deviancy, if you will, as an invitation for them to do what they want with me—access to my mind, access to my body, access to my sexuality—and when they get denied that access, because sex work is all about consent, when they get denied that access, the reactions are so aggressive. . . . And you [could] get assaulted in an office of your professor or at the home of one of your classmates. . . . It sounds very negative, but it's true.¹⁵

When my mother tells her friends what I “do,” she says, “My daughter fights against sex trafficking.” She cannot bring herself to say that I fight for the labor rights of sex workers, and like most people, she cannot reconcile my former work with the fact that I am now a mother. The perspective that femmes can only occupy one space—either the Madonna or the whore—at any particular time is why so many of us experience violence in academia. Academia, like other major social institutions, is not a neutral stage upon which interactions happen, but a living, breathing, political entity with a colonialist, imperialist, classist, ableist, racist, sexist, transphobic, and heteronormative foundation. Thus, it is no longer enough to merely critique the sex industry. As activist-academics, the feminist task at hand is to criticize and attack academia in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through it will be unmasked, so that one can fight against it. As activist-academics, the

feminist task at hand is to change the discourse of duality, the pro-prison policies they engender, and the cultural assumption that sex workers are “dead already.” This fight is in service to eradicating the physical manifestation of discursive violence, “reactions [that] are so aggressive,” said Salvia, as well as reactions that completely erase the difficult and often heartbreaking work of fighting for the labor rights of sex workers.

In 2013, I interviewed white, working-class, sex-working PhD student Jenna in my Las Vegas apartment prior to giving birth. The night before our interview, I tumbled down a flight of stairs while pregnant, and was admitted to the hospital to ensure my fetus had not been harmed. When the male doctor vaginally inspected me without using lubricant, I cried out that he was hurting me. He looked at my male partner, who was in town visiting, and smiled.

“I guess that’s why it’s better to be a man, huh?” he asked rhetorically.

The non-consensual hypersexualization of sex workers’ bodies is an extension of the violence engendered by heteropatriarchy, not its cause. Cis men believe it is “better to be a man” because they understand the violence and power over bodies that they exercise, in both small and large ways. My experience in the hospital was not removed from the experience of being a sex-working academic.

Jenna joked, while passing a joint around my tiny apartment, “Whose dick do I have to suck to get a TA position around here?”

Hers was brilliant commentary on the relationship between the political economy of higher education, gendered, sexualized, erotic labor, and lingering mind/body dualisms in academe for those of us on the hypersexual/ized margins. She also exposed how the violence against sex workers is an extension of—not antithetical to—patriarchal assumptions that masculine bodies are more deserving of care than feminine ones.

A Sex Worker Knowability

When I was 23, I stood shamelessly in a Walgreens checkout next to my sex-working girlfriend. The check-out girl smiled a crooked smile as she rung up my sex sponges, tampons, makeup applicators, condoms, and douches—I was about to sell sex on my period and needed to mask this part of my humanity.

My girlfriend whispered, “People who haven’t cried after fucking a John aren’t real hookers.” In some sense, I knew that I would be calling her later, after seeing my client, crying. It wasn’t that Lee was a bad man; I still remember him fondly as one of the most decent clients—one of the most decent men—I’ve ever met. But the labor was hard, it was intense. Numb from the waist down, Lee was a puppet of his own nostalgia; he sought the image of sex but not sex itself, he sought a sort of fake incarnation of all those addled memories in which he was sure he felt something.

Lee and I indulged the performative aspects of conjugality on a slab of rented mattress, affectless. Particles of sex sponge, tampons, and makeup applicators did little to mask my period, but we continued fucking nonetheless. Of course, given his inability to move, I was solely responsible for the physical act and after six hours of continuous bouncing, gyrating, and thrusting for someone else's sexuality, even the most cold hearted among us would feel emotional. This complexity, this knowability of sex, of bodies, of labor, of money and of poverty is not valued by academia. Not only is a sex worker knowability devalued in academia, it is actively silenced.

In 2014, I interviewed Lulu. A white, working-class woman, former sex-trafficking victim, current sex worker, graduate student at the time of interview, and self-proclaimed anti-capitalist, Lulu lived in the Alaskan wilderness without running water. She stated that she hitchhiked into town to work as a sex worker and to attend school. She was sex-trafficked as a youth by her father into an illegal brothel, but found the experience of being "saved by the State" far more oppressive. She experienced homelessness, sexual assault, and multiple forms of violence as a foster child and, eventually, as a runaway. In spite of great adversity, she completed a bachelor's degree and contemplated going to school for a master's. However, pursuing higher education "didn't work out right away," as she said in our phone interview. She explained:

I started . . . as a [master's student], and it just didn't work out right away. Like the first day of school, there was like this pizza social thing, and one of the professors was an old [sex work] client of mine. Usually when I see old clients, it's cool, but he was like very uncool about it and he was like, "Are you sure this [graduate school] is what you want to do with your life?" And I was like, "I'm just trying to get an education." And he was like, "You know, I just don't think this is really the program for you." I [felt] like this old rich white man [was] trying to tell me what I want, and I [felt] like that [was] actually a violation of the code of [school] ethics, and I think that probably, I'm in more of a position to know what I want and what my ideals are than he is.¹⁶

Lulu's former client-turned-professor overtly bullied her from pursuing a master's degree and silenced her knowability. It would be years before Lulu would muster the courage to attempt graduate school again. At the time of interview, Lulu held a master's degree, was working as a sex worker, and, as she said, she "found emancipation in the in work of Paulo Freire."¹⁷ Although she was a determined and devoted activist for sex workers' rights in the city where she lived, the devaluation of her particular, marginalized epistemology led to an unfortunate, uncomfortable, and arguably nonconsensual rerouting of her educational goals.

Afro-Pessimists like Jared Sexton (2011) argue for an epistemology that comes from marginalized bodies, emotions and experiences. Sexton argues that marginalized bodies—namely, Black bodies—are pushed to the margins of society where they face social and literal death. A truly revolutionary epistemology,

then, should not fear or propagate death, but rather begin with it; it should begin with the margins.

Unfortunately, the lived experiences of sex-working academics demonstrate how marginalized epistemologies are questioned, rejected, and ignored in academia. Like Lulu, my interview with a white, working-class PhD student and instructor, Bailey, who I spoke to after falling down a flight of stairs, exposed similar trends in academia. As she stated in our face-to-face interview,

My first year [of graduate school], I had two professors who felt quite proud of themselves because they saved me from my choices [to come out in academia as a sex worker]. They also felt proud to have saved me from studying the sex industry [because] sex work research is fringe. That's what they called it—*fringe*. It was their way of redeeming me.¹⁸

Bailey's experience elucidates not only the experience with mentoring—or lack thereof—for sex workers in higher education, but also the coerced rerouting of sex workers there and how this rerouting prevents truly emancipatory and sex-worker inclusive epistemologies in academia. This double stigma—of working in and studying the sex industry—is in spite of the fact that many academics study what they know, from environmentalists who study the environment to chronically ill people who study illness. And while several recent studies explore the sex industry from an insider's perspective (Schweitzer 2001; Sanders, O'Neill, and Pitcher 2011; Trautner 2005; Bradley-Engen 2009; Bernstein 2007; Murphy 2003; Barton 2006; Allison 1994; Chapkis 1997; Flowers 1998; Zheng 2009), the concurrent and dominant voices, including voices that inform policy, are those of Anglophone, anti-sex-work feminists in academia (Bindel 2006; Raymond 2013; MacKinnon 1989; Jeffreys 2012; Farley 2013).

Between 2013 and 2014, I interview Samantha twice. As noted by Payne (2010), it is sometimes appropriate to re-interview people with whom a researcher utilizes Critical Life Story interviewing methodologies. A Black sex-working academic with a PhD, Samantha said she wanted to pursue an advanced degree in order to help her learn more about herself and her experiences. She went into the sex industry as an underage person—by definition, a trafficking victim—but she said she was neither coerced nor oppressed by the work. In one of our interviews, she said, “I went into grad school to study sexuality [and] my overarching question was, ‘Is this victim narrative [of sex trafficking] real? Is my situation, one in which I never felt victimized, is that normal?’”¹⁹

However, upon acceptance into a PhD program, she said that her mentors cautioned her against studying the sex industry, particularly from the perspective of someone who “lived the life.” Samantha rerouted her academic experience, studying a more conventional topic for her dissertation work. Despite having incredible access to, knowledge of, and passion for a hard-to-reach population defined as “sex trafficking victims” by the US Federal Government (Adams,

Owens, and Small 2010), she tailored her research to suit the standpoints and assuage the anxieties of her mentors.

What do we, as activist academics, lose from the coerced rerouting of sex-working academics? What knowability of sex, of bodies, of labor, of money, and of poverty gets lost in the academic imperative that femmes “lean in,” be more respectable, act more professionally?

When famous businessman and Republican Foster Friess stated in 2012 that, “In my day, women used Bayer aspirin for contraceptives,” he was exercising heteropatriarchal violence, he was calling on his pussy patrols. In academia, when a sex worker knowability is quashed, it is the intellectual equivalent of telling the modern-day Aspasia to close her legs and shut her mouth.

Toward Emancipation

It was Gayle Rubin who said that “it is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality” (1984, 143). I would add that it is precisely in times like these, when academia is faced with the decision to either align itself with the status quo—where all roads lead to annihilation—or embrace the social and literal death of the margins, that the imperative for an inclusive feminist praxis is undeniable.

In 1974, famed sex worker and activist Margo St. James told Paul Krassner of *Rolling Stone*: “As a woman/whore, I feel equality will never be achieved until women’s sexuality ceases to be the source of our shame—until the men are forced to abandon their pussy patrols” (Chateauvert 2014). More recently, Magalie Lerman observed, “The . . . war on [sex] trafficking [is] housed within the criminal justice system, operating through punishment and incarceration. [The war] seeks to eliminate . . . abstract opponents by attacking communities of . . . sex workers, composed mainly of poor people of color” (2015, 1). The “pussy patrol” that St. James spoke of and the punishment and incarceration that Lerman speaks of is a reference to larger institutions and discourses of power.

In disrupting the academy and from a critical feminist framework, I have analyzed how marginalized bodies become systemically policed and punished. I have asked sex-working academics to reflect on how their own experiences at the intersection of mind and body work toward a better understanding of the “pussy patrols” in academia. By examining the larger political economy of academia, discourses of hypersexualization, and the devaluation of the sexual/ized margins, I find that sex workers in academia are not controlled by the internalization of disembodiment discursive practices, but instead, sex-working academics undergo complicated apprenticeships in which our embodied practices result from particular economic, discursive, and epistemological constraints within academia. In order to understand where and how academic institutions

fail and betray marginalized women, we need to start by taking seriously the lived experiences of sex-working academics.

Ending the pussy patrols in academia, where “pussy” is synonymous not with any particular genitalia but with the restrictions and oppressions put on all femmes, means working on the margins. It means acknowledging and revering marginalized femmes who sit at a unique intersection of stigmatized and criminalized labor and institutions of higher education. It means opening our purview, as academics, to the innumerable ways that intersections of education and criminalized labor furthermore intersect with other identities and experiences.

In some scenarios, sex work is indeed work, plain and simple. But for many of us, it is much more complicated than that; it is much more nuanced than a soundbite. Sometimes, even the best of clients make us cry. Thus, a truly sex-worker inclusive feminist praxis must practice epistemic disobedience; it must disrupt dichotomies.

Activist academics must disrupt feminist dichotomies of empowerment/oppression in the sex industry as well as in academia. It is no longer enough to engage in “civil debate” about the fundamental human rights of sex workers, and it is no longer appropriate to claim that an education is patently empowering. Structural feminist analyses of the sex industry can no longer hide behind a veil of abstraction, as mainstream, academic questions about the merits, morality, and ethics of sex work *necessarily* rely on one-dimensional dichotomies. Interestingly, it is radical, structural feminist analyses of higher education that expose the knowledge-is-power trope as imperialist and colonialist; it is at this precise intersection where our movements and theories must meet.

A disobedient, sex-worker inclusive feminist praxis must disrupt the colonization of the mind and reject the notion that academia is or has ever been neutral; we must disrupt Western notions of objectivity.

A disobedient, sex-worker inclusive feminist praxis is nuanced, empathetic, and emancipatory. It is Righteously. Fucking. Angry. It is theory and practice that intersects with and supports movements for the rights of Black, Brown, and Indigenous folx, trans rights, global water rights movements, abolishing ICE, occupying public spaces and eradicating borders, harm reduction and best practices, and economic and social justice for victims of human trafficking, and so forth.

A disobedient, sex-worker inclusive feminist praxis is both structural and inter/personal. It is political.

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you,” said Maya Angelou, who was herself a sex worker. A disobedient, sex-worker inclusive feminist praxis disrupts the pussy patrols in academia that inflict great agony in the name of respectability. It is time for the pussy patrols in academia to shoulder the burden of our untold stories; it is time for us to write the narratives of our own, complicated, lived experiences. Like sex-working student Lena said

in our interview, “I am rebelling against this strict academic world that doesn’t take into account real-world complexities.”²⁰ Given our current sociopolitical environment, rebelling against the strict academic codes of Cartesian dualisms is indeed a moral imperative.

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Notes

1. Francis Fox Piven, interviewed by Jenny Heineman at the sociological conference, *Society for the Study of Social Problems*, Las Vegas, 2010.
2. Jenna, interviewed by Jenny Heineman, Las Vegas, 2013.
3. Lorelei, phone interview by Jenny Heineman, Omaha, 2015.
4. Lorelei, phone interview by Jenny Heineman, Omaha, 2015.
5. Noel, phone interview by Jenny Heineman, Omaha, 2015.
6. Lucy, phone interview by Jenny Heineman, Omaha, 2014.
7. Jamie, interviewed by Jenny Heineman, Las Vegas and Omaha, 2013 and 2015.
8. Kristin, interviewed by Jenny Heineman, ACLU of Southern California meeting on *Woodhull Freedom Foundation et al. v. United States*, Los Angeles, 2018.
9. Kristin, interviewed by Jenny Heineman, ACLU of Southern California meeting on *Woodhull Freedom Foundation et al. v. United States*, Los Angeles, 2018.
10. This research is part of a larger study in which I interviewed twenty-one sex-working academics, all of whom experienced some degree of unwanted sexual attention in school.
11. Lena, phone interview by Jenny Heineman, Omaha, 2015.
12. Baily, interviewed by Jenny Heineman, Las Vegas, 2013.
13. Samantha, phone interview by Jenny Heineman, Omaha, 2013–14.
14. Vivian Salt, interviewed by Jenny Heineman, Las Vegas and Omaha, 2010–2015.
15. Salvia, phone interview by Jenny Heineman, Omaha, 2015.
16. Lulu, phone interview by Jenny Heineman, Omaha, 2014.
17. Lulu, phone interview by Jenny Heineman, Omaha, 2014.
18. Baily, interviewed by Jenny Heineman, Las Vegas, 2013.
19. Samantha, phone interview by Jenny Heineman, Las Vegas, 2013.
20. Lena, phone interview by Jenny Heineman, Omaha, 2015.

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